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Aubrey Williams: Atlantic fire

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Hymn to the Sun IV, 1984 (*Olmec Maya* series)

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NATIONAL MUSEUMS **LIVERPOOL**

AUBREY WILLIAMS: ATLANTIC FIRE

By Leon Wainwright

The paintings of Aubrey Williams are islands of fire that have scorched their way across a range of different stories of art. One story is about the evolution of British painting in the twentieth century. Another is a story about the way in which Caribbean people have struggled and pressed for their freedom and sparked with modern creativity. Yet another story has passages on Britain and Guyana, Jamaica, South America, and the United States, pulling in all those settings around the Atlantic where Aubrey Williams lived and worked, and where he exhibited his art. It is a story about how Williams had an ability to be in several places at once in the history of art. Williams' legacy is framed within a brilliant composite of narratives; and there his art works have remained, smouldering continually, their heat slowly building. His life story and his art cannot be located in a simple geography, either physical or cultural. Williams painted with fire, and the path that he cut is a hard one to follow.

First, Williams was a full and energetic participant in the London art world of the post-war years. He was what the critic Guy Brett has called 'a modern, contemporary artist, the equal of any other'.¹ In several turbulent decades of change for painting, he worked to establish himself in a difficult and shifting field. He took part in his first group show in London in October 1954 at the little-known Archer Gallery in Westbourne Grove, but he waited a further five years for a major solo exhibition, at the New Vision Centre Gallery, a gallery known for its broad embrace of artists from outside Britain. That exhibition led to invitations to exhibit in Paris

and Milan and Chicago. It was not until 1963 that his first serious accolade came when he took the only prize at the *First Commonwealth Biennale of Abstract Art* with the painting *Roraima*.

Yet Williams' initial success would be associated with stereotypes of the Caribbean and South America, as writers responded with florid accounts of his 'primitive urgency', and how his paintings 'were full of tangled forests and African rituals'.² This may explain why his progress was so slow in getting his art shown in spaces other than those that had an inclusive agenda in their support for artists of the Commonwealth. His main difficulty was that critics could not bring themselves to see him as an artist who signalled future developments for painting. Although he clearly had absorbed and used abstractionism, Williams had to try hard to shake the assumption that he was not up to date with developments on the contemporary art scene. The consequences were personally devastating. In the mid-1960s he battled with feeling 'terribly isolated, physically and intellectually',³ and a sense of being made the 'outsider'. Influential critics continued to see him as an artist who might have left behind a place not known for its modern art, but who could never fully 'arrive'. He remained entangled in Guyana, the Caribbean, even Africa, where he had not yet been. The language of some British critics made it clear that if Williams were looking for a place in the story of modern art, then he had come from the wrong location, and was just too late.

In a sense, this first story about Aubrey Williams – as the complex, misunderstood, modernist artist – has led more sympathetic art historians and critics to take a second view of him. It has enabled them to talk more openly about his experience of defiantly struggling with these obstacles of indifference, exoticism and exclusion. This is the story of Williams as part of the great modern tale of black achievement in art and culture. It is about his paintings as a meditation on what it meant to be someone of African descent in the twentieth century, to be part of life in the Caribbean and of black Britain. Many curators and critics emphasised this story over roughly the final ten years of Williams' career, and they have continued to point it out since. *Caribbean Expressions in Britain* for example, took this view, displaying works by Williams among those by a group of artists who largely identified as Afro-Caribbean or black British.⁴ In the accompanying literature to the exhibition *Back to Black: Art, Cinema and the Racial Imaginary*, curators chose to see certain of Williams' pieces as close to Haitian 'voodoo'.⁵

Kobena Mercer looks at Williams' art as 'Black Atlantic Abstraction'.⁶ His essay remains one of the more virtuoso clarifications of the artist with regard to the issue of ethnicity and modernist abstraction. He is portrayed as a sophisticated artist forever absorbed in 'cross-cultural relationships', and in pursuit, however indirectly, of the theme of blackness. Mercer argues that in Williams' art we can read the 'universal relevance of the themes of loss, separation and survival' that flows 'from the specificity of diaspora subjectivities that have been historically shaped by collective experiences of trauma and catastrophe'.⁷ In this reading, his art is especially linked to the idea of

diaspora. For Mercer it is essential that Williams' paintings are seen through the lens of the artist's part-African ancestry and his experience of moving from place to place along the Atlantic networks that connect black communities in the Americas, Africa and Western Europe. Mercer explores Williams' 'black Atlantic' roots to explain the multiple sources informing his art, the 'unrepresentable' trauma that is thought to be shared by African-descended communities in the diaspora. This interpretation of Williams' art is important for adding a sense of his connections to other artists within the larger community of black diaspora peoples, and it evokes a deep attachment to blackness as a source of emotional power. It suggests how Williams may be considered a key participant in a wider Atlantic story.

Other stories about Williams branch out into further ways of seeing him. They begin from the fact that Williams had a long and sustained interest in the indigenous historical cultures of South America. His training and work as an agronomist had taken him to the northwest of Guyana where he lived for two years among the Warrau. This experience became the foundation for the artist's broad investigation of Olmec, Mayan, Carib and other historic American cultures. He would examine the iconography of Mesoamerican relief sculpture, calendars, calligraphy and temples, while painting his *Olmec Maya* series of canvases (produced between 1981 and 1985), and a great many of his earlier and subsequent paintings.⁸ This became an integral component of Williams' career as a painter. As he explained: 'The core of my activity is my interest in pre-Columbian culture and in my involvement with pre-Columbian artefacts. ... For me pre-Columbian culture is still full of mystery. It's a no-man's land even to the scientists.'

There are things in Mayan civilisation which are not yet clear to us. They can't be explained rationally. And that's what I mean by mystery. I'm not ashamed of using this mystery in my work.⁹ This enduring fascination is there as an abiding refrain, sometimes in figurative scenes, or worked in with his abstractionism.

This aspect of Williams' practice compares with the general orientation towards indigenous historical cultures that can be seen in the work of other Caribbean writers and fine artists. The most widely recognised are Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite and Wilson Harris. From Jamaica, Michelle Cliff's fiction offers narratives of indigenous ancestry, as does Pauline Melville, writing in Britain and Guyana, while the *zemi* (power figure) carving of the Antilles was a likely influence on the work of the sculptor Edna Manley.¹⁰ These patterns of connection suggest that Williams' interests are associated with the distinctive trend in Caribbean arts and letters that took shape from the moment after the Second World War when the Caribbean underwent a momentous transition from British colonialism to Independence. At a time of anti-colonial nationalism, the purposeful embrace of the Caribbean's indigenous presence by artists and writers was a way of thinking strategically about the political and cultural alternatives to European rule. The peoples of the South American forest and savannah, in what was then British Guiana, became a lively focus for imagining the qualities of a future, free Caribbean. The Caribbean's history of European impositions was relatively recent when compared to its longer, pre-colonial, pre-Columbian past. The region's artists and writers looked to the evidence of ways of life that were thought to be untouched by European power. Fixing an eye on

historical and indigenous cultural materials, they designed and imagined an original personality for the Caribbean.

Countries such as Guyana and Trinidad, as today, had no African-descended majority, but rather a mix of ethnicities including South Asian ('East Indian'), indigenous peoples, Portuguese, Chinese and northwest European. Williams and his painting were at the centre of Caribbean attempts to construct a new community out of this diversity. This may resonate with the merging of indigenous American history and African history that has sometimes punctuated British black radicalism in the decades following Williams' death.¹¹ But the indigenous inspiration - these cultures' historical collapse, and yet the example of their present day endurance - would offer more than that for Williams. It was the starting point for something greater than the Caribbean political field, or the celebration of Africanness. Williams suggested how Olmec and Mayan experience would allow the discovery of other ways and means of living modern lives.

Through his elaborate, enormous output in painting, Williams was able to point to why the Olmec, Mayan and Carib examples had relevance beyond the Caribbean. His canvases were designed to hold a purpose that went beyond any single regional geography or identity. He was thinking beyond the cultural and political debates about Caribbeanness, blackness, and Britishness, beyond Europe and America, beyond the details of region, nation, and place. A more distant light was orienting his search, which drew him into a more properly global picture, and yet another art story.

Painting had a dynamic potential for Williams as a vehicle for his wide exploration of interior and exterior life. He used his art practice to engage and change modern art's concerns with philosophy and aesthetics. He was attracted to the idea that modernism could be a way of criticising centres of power, and could itself undermine the idea that there should be a single best way of seeing and showing the world. Having lived on both sides of the Atlantic, he occupied a unique, international vantage point. He was suitably emotionally distanced from Britain to be capable of bringing new contributions to painting in Europe. The same was true of his standpoint in relation to the Caribbean. By virtue of his migratory experience, Williams explored cultural references across the Atlantic world.

Williams' paintings were invigorated by diverse creative materials, shapes and meanings which he brought together, and by using fire, he defied their conventional separation. As such, his goal was to generate a novel sort of interaction in the field of painting around the phenomenon of fire. He showed that fire has a rich metaphorical energy, and could also become the raw material for a curiously physical exploration. Fire could signal destruction or hail renewal, an ambivalence that he explored in paintings that respond to the delicate cycles of the natural environment. The more transformative aspects of fire were initially probed in those early paintings by Williams where a red-coloured space forms a pervading source of light for the compositions. In a piece from 1960, entitled *Revolt*, this colour is a literal indication of burning plantation fields and houses during episodes of rebellion. This visualises the preoccupation with fire among Williams' Guyanese contemporaries, such as the poet Martin

Carter's 'revolutionary alphabet of freedom'.¹² Carter published his selected poems under the title *The Hill of Fire Glows Red*, a colour that Williams would first take up and seriously explore in his canvases of the 1960s. The colour red would separate into a variety of hues, as Williams moved to show how the painted surface could be turned into a gradually consuming flame. Over his long career, fire infiltrated several of his major groups of paintings.

His *Olmec Maya* series contains shapes that seem to be set against a background of continually burning, colourful flame. Explicitly fiery images are found in his paintings under the title *Hymn to the Sun*. In many of these, Williams chooses not to paint recognisable images of the sun, favouring the alternative: to convey a larger aesthetic totality or perceptual experience re-ordered on the canvas. In parallel, however, there are discernible aspects of the composition that do remain naturalistic. There is a burst of rays from behind a cloud and the sharp edges of linear shafts of light. He thereby both aligned his works to the abstractionist suggestion of essence, while merging them with the observation of nature.

In other pieces, such as *Codex II*, various icons appear. These are schematically illustrated features of the landscape, drawn from places in the Americas that serve as the navigation points on pre-European maps. Williams would learn about these from the cartographic codices in the British Museum collection - epic manuscripts that illustrate pathways around landmarks, and encrypted indications of the expected time spent in traversing the distances among them. Translating these pictograms into essays on canvas was a huge undertaking. It would result

in a core of flame in the picture, framed by stout blocks of primary colour or a swirling background. A frame of burning light and flame would grant brilliance to the central shape, while also working to distort it. Here the icon would be caught at a fleeting state, frozen in time. An explosion of light would blow apart a form that is poised forever at a moment of change.

From the same cultural context Williams borrowed fire to blaze another trail. The force of fire and light was heard especially loudly in his paintings about music. Like large, warm blossoms and petals, areas of vibrant colour dominate. Tongues or leaves of fire are mixed in with flat and spreading colour fields. In the film about Aubrey Williams, *The Mark of the Hand*, the artist speaks of his early encounter with Shostakovich, on hearing his First Symphony. The recollection suggests the overlapping of touch, sound and memory that animates his series as a whole. As he puts it, 'I could feel colour'.¹³ This is an appeal to the tactility of vision, and to the cross-matching of the senses across a wider spectrum. His *Shostakovich* series is rooted in a sensorial project, wonderfully extending the potential of sound to take on shape and texture. These works reveal the ability of music to create spatial depth that can be pictured and played with. Here the painter's response to mystery gives way to other excursions of wonder. Flames blow across the canvases and clear the way for mesmerising vistas. They merge the horizons between the vision of Shostakovich, and the listening ear of Williams the artist.

Fire and air for Williams are elements with a creative temperament. They seem to have their own personalities,

and are transitional and volatile. The abiding drama in his paintings takes place in the moments after the breaking of a boundary in the split second when nothing has yet quite escaped or spilled out. Around these permeable edges is the still, clear vacuum of the canvas, areas that seem waiting to be filled. When thought about as the interplay of characters, here is the indifference of space offsetting the exuberance of flame. There is no stasis that cannot be injected with new energy, cannot be stirred. Strokes of paint across a closed form release the shape and melt its edges, lift and unpack its compressions. Colours grow under the heat and surge and spread out under an astonishing light. Williams' *Cosmos* paintings, the series begun in 1985, search out this process in a totally different physical habitat. They transpose his wonder for fire to a realm of stars and planets. Bubbling rings of colour stand out from a background of desolation and darkness. Directionless, celestial bodies drift and are eclipsed in vast trails of illuminated dust. They collect as stars in tiny pieces; the pyroclastic debris from huge explosions; fires in space.

Williams took an approach that refused to fit with the mainstream of academic abstractionism. It was an assault on theoretical debates around painting that dominated in North America at the mid twentieth century, epitomised in the writings of Clement Greenberg and the all-over abstract paintings of Jackson Pollock. This would see him doing battle with the preference for 'formalism' – the idea that an artist's foremost responsibility is to the demands of a chosen medium. Williams was sceptical of the argument that a true standard of achievement lies in establishing painting as a poetic form somehow happily detached from the pressures of the world around it. Such scepticism

marked the beginning of the end for the centrality of the brand of modernism. Williams relished the chance to recast the relationship of abstraction and figuration. He would look askance at establishment assumptions about what was modern art, and what was not. A major challenge to modernist orthodoxy issued from anti-colonial nationalist movements and from other spaces outside the conventional geographical boundaries of modernism. For the broad programme of alternatives that they posed, Williams was attracted to artists from Mexico, Cuba and South America, such as Roberto Matta, Rufino Tamayo, Diego Rivera, José Orozco and Wifredo Lam, and to Shostakovich's music.

A similar questioning process eventually transformed modern art at its core. It was a troubling of Greenbergian values that erupted in the British setting where Williams was based. Guy Brett has usefully linked Williams' approach to abstraction to that of artists such as Peter Lanyon and Alan Davie, for their common connection to music and ancient cultural or environmental heritage.¹⁴ The later non-figurative painters Gillian Ayres and Albert Irvin are noted by the curator Andrew Dempsey as a firm connection with Williams during the 1970s and 80s.¹⁵ Williams joined his British peers in their desire to rid themselves of the constraints that painting had been put under by institutions of modern art. It is significant that his works took human themes and materials that would foreground the ubiquity of myth. This flew in the face of thinkers in the modernist tradition with their appetite for formal purity. Incrementally, methodically, his embrace of the material culture of indigenous America was nothing less than the undoing of an establishment appetite.

Williams embodied the convergence of challenges around modernism in the latter part of twentieth century art history. He was an active presence within the British scene and yet he continued to influence the region of his birth. He visited, or sent paintings across, and took active part in exhibitions. Consequently he took a transatlantic role in the process of re-assessing the nature of the experience of modernity. Williams enjoyed a career that epitomises how art in his time became more critically plural, particularised and global. The pool of participants in contemporary art would grow, both including artists for whom modernism had seemed an exclusive domain, while transforming the purpose of art practice beyond older definitions.

This more international interpretation of modernism needs to be seized upon today. We are at the right moment to forego the sharp distinctions between figuration and abstraction that so exercised modernism. The re-evaluation of artists who displayed a more critical approach might be done by reference to those works by Williams that collapse that distinction. Most memorable are those where this takes place on the same canvas, and so upsets a generally held assumption of the need to keep figures and abstracted surfaces apart. It is vital not to think about these various dimensions of Williams' works as if they should sit in disconnected categories. The way that he merges and blurs the parallels of painting places him ahead of the curve that led beyond modernism. It shows how he should never be seen as an artist who came 'too late'.

Williams may be included in several stories of art that each seems distinct from the next, just as he may be located in a range of remote geographies. But the fire of his

canvases burns away the boundaries that separate these narratives and spaces. He made the painted surface into an assembly of flames, making flames present, rather than simply depicting or illustrating how flames might appear to the observer. The line between these approaches is subtle, but crucial. It is drawn between painting as presence, and painting as illusionism, and locates Williams within an avant-garde tradition, asserting his place in and amongst several art stories. He faced isolation from the global art circuit, and misrecognition in Britain, and his burning canvases pushed at the barriers of exclusion that he encountered. Fire was his fundamental tool and his canvases have a pointedly incendiary purpose.

What might be called Williams' 'Atlantic fire' is above all the radical quality of his art. It illuminates the stories that have typically been told about him, the contexts in which he has been fitted. Fire's erasing, excoriating effects are seen best when we examine what it leaves behind in his paintings. In many of his most powerful paintings, large areas of the compositions are empty of form and abstract a sensation of infinity. The boundaries between fields and forms, once disturbed, have turned into vapour, or are left incomplete. Any demand for flat colour is refused. In these works, Williams seems not to be content with picturing particular places, or times, and leaves them open to contemplation. They trail into other realms of possibility. The fires that he started keep on burning.

- 1 G. BRETT. (1998) 'A tragic excitement'. In: WHITECHAPEL GALLERY in association with InIVA Institute of International Visual Arts. *Aubrey Williams*. [exhibition catalogue] 12 June – 16 August 1998. InIVA Institute of International Visual Arts. London. p. 24.
- 2 E. NEWTON. (1958) 'Round the London Galleries'. In: *The Listener*. 28 Aug 1958. p. 310.
- 3 R. ARAEEN. (1987/88) 'Conversation with Aubrey Williams'. p. 19 in this catalogue. Originally published in *Third Text* (2) pp. 25-52.
- 4 The exhibition originated in 1986 (16th August to 28th September) at Leicestershire Museum and Art Gallery, New Walk, Leicester, and was selected by Pogus Caesar, Bill Ming and Aubrey Williams.
- 5 WHITECHAPEL GALLERY. (2005) *Back to Black: Art, Cinema and the Racial Imaginary*. P. Archer-Straw, D. A. Bailey and R. Powell, Eds. London.
- 6 K. MERCER. (2006) 'Black Atlantic Abstraction: Aubrey Williams and Frank Bowling' pp. 182-205. In: K. MERCER, Ed. (2006) *Discrepant Abstraction*. InIVA Institute of International Visual Arts / MIT. London and Mass..
- 7 K. MERCER. (2006), p. 185.
- 8 Recently, this aspect of Williams' vision led to his inclusion in the anthropological exhibition *From Amazon to Caribbean: Early Peoples of the Rainforest* (London, Horniman Museum. 1 October 2005 – 7 January 2007).
- 9 R. ARAEEN. (1987/88) 'Conversation with Aubrey Williams'. p.21 in this catalogue. Originally published in *Third Text* (2) pp. 25-52.
- 10 M. L. EMERY. (2007) *Modernism, The Visual, and Caribbean Literature*. Cambridge University Press.
- 11 See, for instance, G. F. Kelly 'Should Africans be Celebrating 1992' in the pamphlet focusing on the Caribbean 1992 and the New World: 500 Years of Resistance by Leicester-Masaya Link Group (1992). The article by the sculptor George 'Fowokan' Kelly, refers specifically to the Olmec as signifier of an African presence in the Americas, and an illustration of an Olmec head which could easily have served as a model for Williams' *Night and the Olmec*.
- 12 G. ROBINSON. (2004) 'If freedom writes no happier alphabet': Martin Carter and Poetic Silence'. In: *Small Axe* (2004) 8 (1), pp. 43-62.
- 13 *The Mark of the Hand*. (1986) Film / DVD. Directed by I. BAKARI. The Arts Council / Kuumba Productions. London.
- 14 G. BRETT. (1998) p. 28.
- 15 A. DEMPSEY. (1998) 'Curator's Foreword'. In: WHITECHAPEL GALLERY in association with InIVA Institute of International Visual Arts. *Aubrey Williams*. [exhibition catalogue] 12 June – 16 August 1998. InIVA Institute of International Visual Arts. London. p. 12.

